



US Army Corps
of Engineers
Detroit District

Great Lakes Update

The Soo Locks Visitors Center A Great Vacation Destination

Since the first ships passed through the legendary Soo Locks in 1855, a certain fascination loomed for the countless number of visitors to the complex. From boat watching to learning about the operation of the locks, visitors have always been a vital part of the project.

Recent improvements at the Soo Locks Visitors Center have enhanced the lock experience and modernized the Center. The improvements include touch screen internet access, video monitors, and new ship models.

With some of the proposed improvements to the Soo Locks Visitors Center already complete, the Detroit District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers cordially invites you to visit the “world famous” Soo Locks during your summer vacation. Several firms also offer guided boat tours, allowing customers to experience the locking process firsthand. With the improved Visitors Center and other established attractions, the Soo Locks will continue to be a popular vacation destination.



Figure 1: Aerial view of the “world famous” Soo Locks (circa 1995)



Figure 2: The Soo Locks Visitors Center, 2003

Early History of the Locks

In the early years of the Soo Locks, access to the property was mostly unobstructed. The general public could literally reach out and touch the passing ships as they moved through the locks.



Figure 3: 1896 photo of a Corps vessel in the Poe Lock. Note the public near the lock walls

Visitors were also allowed open access to the two park areas adjacent to the locks. These parks, divided into the upper and lower parts, include fountains, historical markers and landscaped walkways. Numerous events have been held in the parks since their creation.



Figure 4: 1903 photo of the Administration Building and part of the adjacent park

Seeing the growing interest of the public, the Corps of Engineers constructed the current Visitors Center in 1970. Located in the upper park area, the Center includes many exhibits showing the history and operations of the lock complex. A legislative appropriation on May 31, 2002 provided funds to improve the Visitors Center and surrounding grounds

Future Improvements

The original design of the Visitors Center will be greatly improved and modernized with the next round of improvements. Flagpoles bearing the colors of the nations sailing through the locks and decorative pavement will line the entry plaza. A replica stack from a ship displaying the Corps' "Castle" logo and containing an electronic sign announcing the Visitors Center will be added near the front gate.

The facade of the building itself will also be improved. The plaza will be sloped up to the entrance of the building, eliminating the need for steps and ramps. A prominent sign in the shape of a lake ship bow will identify the building as the "Soo Locks Visitors Center."

Improvements to the Center's interior are also planned. New lighting and paint schemes will create a dramatic effect, directing attention to the exhibits. All usable space will be utilized to maximize the viewer's experience.

Attendants at a custom-built reception desk, constructed in the style of a traditional Captain's quarters, will greet visitors as they enter the Center. The attendants, wearing appropriate costumes reflecting Great Lakes navigation, will schedule tours, distribute materials, answer questions and operate the improved theater.

An orientation area near the front door will contain a brochure rack and multimedia kiosk providing information about other local attractions. Panels displayed behind the kiosk

will display the missions of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Detroit District.

An improved theater will allow for a variety of videos and other media to be shown. The room can be arranged to accommodate meetings and other special events.



Figure 5: Artist rendition of reception desk

To enhance visitor participation, a replica Lockmaster's Tower will be added in the Center. It will include a simulated view of the locks using a video screen. Participants will choose from real-time view or a compressed 24-hour tape of lock operations. Radios monitoring several relevant frequencies and a possible computer simulation game will add to the authenticity of the replica.

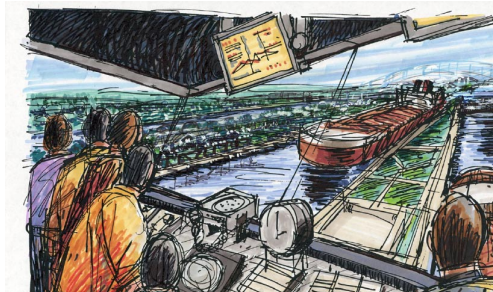


Figure 6: Artist rendition of the replica tower

A new lock model will also be constructed. Visitors will be able to gather around the model to see a short demonstration explaining the

mechanical aspects of the locks. Lighting will point out movement and various sound effects will enhance the authenticity of the model. Murals of the current view around the locks will provide a realistic setting.

Replica lock gates will run from the floor to the ceiling near the rear of the Center. A mirrored ceiling will allow the gates to appear much larger and taller, enhancing the idea of passing through the lock. These replica gates will be built from wood, with special details making them look like steel. Video monitors and displays noting the construction and operation of the locks will be placed in the replica gates.

The most popular aspect of the visitors' experience at the Soo Locks is watching the massive lake freighters navigate through the locks. Visitors will be able to view the locking process with some added features. Graphic displays will show color schemes of the various ships along with stories about some of the better-known boats. A display highlighting the Detroit District's boats will also be shown. Visitors will also have access to the viewing platform adjacent to the MacArthur Lock for an up-close look.

During the visitor season, special activities may be scheduled in the areas outside of the Center. Bands, cultural shows and historical demonstrations are among the activities that will enhance the overall experience.

With all the scheduled changes, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Detroit District expects the improved Visitors Center to be state-of-the-art and a popular tourist attraction. Don't wait for the finished product. Visit "The Soo" today.

As always, check out the Detroit District's home page at www.lre.usace.army.mil for updates on current events at the Soo and across the Great Lakes Basin. If you cannot visit the Soo in person, you can always visit the Soo Locks web cam link on our home page!

Soo Locks Visitors Center Association

The Soo Locks Visitors Center Association's mission is to convey the past, showcase the present and enlighten the future of the Soo Locks. The Association plays an active role in providing greater interpretation, information and hospitality at the Visitors Center. You can help by joining one of several membership categories.

For more information, including how to join visit http://www.lre.usace.army.mil/index.cfm?chn_id=1939

Engineers Day Festivities

Recently, Engineers Day was celebrated at the Soo Locks. One of the more popular activities was the Soo Locks Open House, which invited the public into the lock complex. Other activities included a 60th anniversary celebration of the MacArthur Lock and the unveiling of the improved Visitors Center. The Corps' new survey vessel, the BUFE, was also dedicated.

Public Meetings

A Great Lakes Sustainability Conference was held during the Engineers Day celebration at the Soo the week of June 24, 2003. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Great Lakes Commission sponsored the conference. A variety of topics critical to the sustainability of the Great Lakes were discussed, including Great Lakes restoration, recreation and waterfront development, biodiversity, and water quantity and quality.

The International Lake Superior Board of Control hosted an Open House the evening of Tuesday June 24, 2003 at the Civic Centre in Sault Sainte Marie, Ontario. The Board holds a public meeting annually to inform the public of current activities and to solicit questions and comments. Issues raised at this meeting included current lake level conditions, peaking and ponding operations at the U.S. and Canadian

hydropower plants, and the recent Silver Lake Dam failure on the Dead River near Marquette. Because of this dam failure, the Lake Superior Board of Control allowed an overdischarge from Lake Superior in May and June during the emergency. Other items discussed included concerns about diversions into and out of Lakes Superior and Michigan, impacts of groundwater withdrawals, and the status of the "Upper Great Lakes Plan of Study," which is expected to address many of these and other concerns.

The International Niagara Board of Control will host an open house to inform the public of current activities and to hear public comment and suggestions. In addition, information on the operation of the Lake Erie – Niagara River Ice Boom and current Great Lakes water levels will be presented.

The International Niagara Board of Control Open House will be held Monday, September 15, 2003.

Old Stone Inn
5425 Robinson Street
Niagara Falls, Ontario

For more information on the meeting, please contact Mr. Len Falkiner, Secretary, Canadian Section, International Niagara Board of Control at (905) 336-4947 or by email at Len.Falkiner@ec.gc.ca.